

“You Stand With Whoever’s Getting Their Head Bashed In”:

Denise Giardina’s Literary-Political Calling

“Growing up [in Appalachia] is what made me a writer,” declared novelist Denise Giardina in a 1988 interview with Tim Boudreau; “staying here is what keeps me the kind of writer I want to be.”¹ Appalachia has served similarly to make the protagonist of her 1998 novel *Saints and Villains* what Giardina wants him to be. Her fictional account of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s life features a fabricated West Virginia detour in the German theologian’s real-life journey from Berlin to New York’s Union Theological Seminary and back again. Taking advantage of a gap in the record of Bonhoeffer’s Summer 1931 travels after seminary, Giardina brings the character to her own native West Virginia to visit a black classmate. When the characters take a horrifying field trip to an isolated tunnel-drilling camp, Bonhoeffer’s fictional friend discovers his calling to minister to the African-American laborers there. Later, Bonhoeffer reflects on his classmate’s experience as he discerns his own dangerous vocation in Nazi Germany. In transporting Bonhoeffer to the place where she grew up, Giardina reveals at least as much about her own sense of calling as she does about his. For both the character and the writer, calling comes from a specific community of people who need help.

This paper explores the ways in which community informs Giardina’s sense of calling as a writer, as a political activist, and as a minister. Like the Bonhoeffer of *Saints and Villains* and so many other characters in her fiction, Giardina finds in her own community—indeed, even in her own landscape—calls to service. In her fictional biography of Henry V, *Good King Harry* (1984); her West Virginia coal-mining novels *Storming Heaven* (1987) and *The Unquiet Earth* (1992); *Saints and Villains*; and even in her fanciful time-travel romance *Fallam’s Secret* (2003), Giardina explores the responsibility humans have to stand against injustice and for human rights within community. Although her books are not overtly religious, many of her characters

¹ Tim Boudreau, “Fighting Back: Denise Giardina Talks About *Storming Heaven*,” *Now and Then* 5:1 (Spring 1988): 9-10.

recognize that responsibility in the context of Christian faith. When asked about the connection she sees between Christianity and human rights, Giardina says, “I just assume it.... If you take the teachings of Jesus seriously at all, ... caring for somebody else as you care for yourself, what could be more important than human rights? If you’re caring about ‘the least of these,’ ... you stand with whoever’s getting their head bashed in.”² Most often, Giardina recognizes those people to be West Virginia mountaineers.

While the novelist’s decision to transplant Dietrich Bonhoeffer to West Virginia in *Saints and Villains* may seem somewhat self-indulgent, Giardina does so to good effect. Moreover, the young German theologian would have likely sympathized with Giardina’s impulse to link vocational calling to a specific place and the community there. In his unfinished masterpiece *Ethics*, begun as a set of lectures delivered in Edinburgh in 1939 and continued after the Nazis forbade him to preach in 1940, Bonhoeffer treats the subject at length. While Martin Luther had challenged Christians to expand the Roman Catholic understanding of vocation beyond a “calling” to the monastery or convent, Bonhoeffer offered a corrective to followers of Luther who had come to believe that they were fulfilling their Christian duty simply by carrying out their secular roles as family members, workers, and citizens. Deeper than all those callings, Bonhoeffer asserts, was the call to fellowship in Jesus Christ. Such callings are, however, particular to individuals in specific life stations and locations. Bonhoeffer writes,

Divine grace comes upon man and lays claim to him. It is not man who seeks out grace in its own place ..., but it is grace which seeks and finds man in *his* place—the Word was made flesh...—and which precisely in this place lays claim to him.... At the precise place where he *is* he is to hear the call and allow it to lay claim to him. (italics mine)³

² Denise Giardina, personal interview, 2 March 2004.

³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, ed. Eberhard Bethge, trans. Neville Horton Smith (New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, Tokyo, and Singapore: Touchstone, 1995) 250-1.

Bonhoeffer does add, however, that one's place may not necessarily be limited to the immediate space in which he finds himself, asserting that "my neighbor may well be one who is extremely remote from me, and one who is extremely remote from me may well be my neighbor."⁴

Giardina illustrates this principle by having the fictional Bonhoeffer realize through reflecting on his Summer 1931 West Virginia experience eight years later that he must return to his remote "neighbors" in Germany as the Nazi political threat grows ever greater.

Giardina's own sense of place emerged, not surprisingly, from her childhood in the Appalachian mountains. Born in 1952 in Bluefield, West Virginia, she grew up in McDowell County's Black Wolf mining camp, where her father worked as a bookkeeper for Page Coal and Coke. His family had emigrated from Sicily to work as miners, and Giardina's grandfather and two uncles still dug coal underground when she was a child. Her mother, a nurse, had deeper regional roots, having grown up nearby in eastern Kentucky. When the Black Wolf mine closed in 1965 and the family moved to Charleston, the state capitol, the thirteen year-old experienced what she later called "a traumatic loss of community."⁵

Giardina credits her childhood experiences in the coal camp as having been foundational to her passion for civil rights work, especially with regard to race relations. She remembers listening to the laughter of black moviegoers whom she couldn't see behind the dividing wall the local segregated cinema and wondering why black neighbors didn't go to the area swimming pool. Although her mother had also grown up in Appalachia and had never really known any black people, she forbade young Denise to use the word "nigger" and started an integrated Brownie troop when her daughter was in first grade, horrifying officials in the West Virginia state Girl Scout headquarters with the troop photograph. Giardina recounts that when scouting officials told her mother to disband the troop, "she refused to back down, and they finally said,

⁴ 254.

⁵ Bondreau 10.

‘All right, you can keep the troop as long as you destroy all the pictures, even the negatives, because we don’t want this in the newspaper’.⁶

Despite her mother’s lack of racial prejudice, Giardina said that she herself was in danger of developing a sense of racial superiority as a white grade-schooler. Much to her surprise, county spelling bee rivals from a black school defeated her team. “They just cleaned our clocks,” she said. “Actually, it was kind of a good thing to lose, I think. That’s a grace,” she said, chuckling, “losing a spelling bee, although I didn’t think so at the time. I think that was really a good lesson.”⁷ As she matured, she developed a keen awareness of injustice and a deep admiration for Martin Luther King, Jr., whom she calls “our greatest moral leader.” “The way African-Americans have dealt with their situation has amazed me,” she remarks. “I’d tear down, but they build up.”⁸ She is quick to acknowledge that African-American spirituality has been shaped by the church.

While her commitment to civil rights grew during her coming of age in the 1960s, Giardina also felt drawn to the church—not to the quasi-fundamentalist Methodist church of the Black Wolf coal camp but to the Anglican Church during a semester in England. Having earned a degree in history from West Virginia Wesleyan College in 1973 and taken graduate courses at Marshall University, she continued her education at Virginia Theological Seminary near D.C., where she lived in a Sojourners urban religious community. Ordained an Episcopal deacon in 1979, she requested and received an assignment near her childhood home. She ran afoul of church authorities when she led an investigation of local land records showing that 85 percent of McDowell County land belonged to out-of-state corporations. When she and her neighbors began calling for higher taxes for absentee landholders, conservative parishioners objected. One former ministry colleague, the Rev. Jim Lewis, asserts that “the church double-crossed her. The bishop

⁶ Denise Giardina, interview with the author, Hollins College, Hollins, VA, 2 March 2004.

⁷ Interview.

⁸ Interview.

didn't give her the support he should have."⁹ Disillusioned, Giardina left the church, returned to Sojourners briefly, and then went to work for Democratic representative Bob Wise in Charleston.

In Charleston, her commitments to political work and writing converged. After serving as a congressional aide for Wise, she then took work as a secretary and free-lance journalist in order to focus on fiction-writing. She published her first novel, *Good King Harry*, in 1984. Giardina's Henry V stands with "whoever's getting their head bashed in": in his case, the Welsh among whom he spent his early years. Although he is, of course, an English nobleman, he identifies far more strongly with those in his community of origin: Joan, his wet nurse-nanny; his playmate Rhys; and Merryn, the beautiful Welsh girl whom he takes as his wife, albeit without a formal ceremony. His early observation of Welsh suffering at the hands of his father's men makes him skeptical about war, even though he is destined to become a conqueror himself. In depicting King Henry's moral struggles, Giardina grapples not only with her own concerns about militarism but also about the oppression of a mountain people by outsiders.

She tackled those subjects again in *Storming Heaven*, published in 1987 to glowing reviews. In her second novel, however, the mountain people Giardina celebrates aren't Welsh but Appalachian mountaineers. She uses several of those mountaineer characters to explore the subject of calling. One of the story's four narrators, Carrie Bishop, grows up to become a mining community nurse and labor activist but first feels the pull to identify with a playmate who's figuratively "getting his head bashed in." When others belittle her friend Albion Freeman, Carrie sides with him although, she confides, "it seemed to me a choice from which there would be no retreat. They belonged and he did not, and to leave their circle and the warmth of it would mean that I possessed the power to cast myself into the outer darkness where moved the misfits, the

⁹ Peter Carlson, "Third-Party Candidate is Out to Save Her World" *Washington Post* (Wed. 25 October 2000) C01. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn?pagename&node> =. 6 March 2004.

lost, and the brave.”¹⁰ Years later, Albion tells Carrie about his own calling to serve those who suffer in the coal mines:

“I got to tell you something.... I’ve talked for a spell about leaving here.... I been scairt to say too much to you for fear you wouldn’t go with me and I’d never see you again. But the call is stronger and louder. I got to go, Carrie.”

“When?” [Carrie asked.]

“Soon as I’m able. I plan to go down to the mines. I know hit sounds crazy when I got such a good life here. But my daddy allays aimed to make it back there. He raised me with that notion. And God keeps telling me to do it, too. I’m a preacher, pledged to bring His word to the lost. There’s where they are, Carrie, over yonder. I hear them crying out in my sleep. I got to go.”¹¹

Carrie later observes that when Albion “first set eyes on the tall, narrow [coal] tippie at Felco” (a community Giardina modeled after her own Black Wolf) “he said, ‘That there is my church.’”¹² Defending Albion to a union-organizer who scoffs at him for “just preaching,” Carrie retorts, “Hit aint just preaching.... He’s preaching God delivering the children of Israel out of Egypt. He’s preaching the first shall be last and the last first. You know he goes to folks’ houses and speaks the Word? They study the Bible then, too. And they study the United Mineworkers.”¹³ Giardina thus uses her characters to show how Christian faith both enables one to recognize the call of the community and also empowers him to pursue justice on the community’s behalf.

Giardina traces the lives of Carrie’s descendents and their neighbors in her next book, *The Unquiet Earth*, continuing to explore the concept of calling as she chronicles events in a coal-mining community plagued by exploitation. Calling, however, emerges even more obviously as the central theme of her next book, *Saints and Villains*. After watching Fred Bishop leave his

¹⁰ Denise Giardina, *Storming Heaven* (New York: Ivy, 1987) 46.

¹¹ *SH* 148.

¹² *SH* 163.

¹³ *SH* 173.

prominent African-American congregation to minister to tunnel-diggers in Appalachia, Dietrich Bonhoeffer subsequently recognizes his own calling to remind the German Church of their obligations—including coming alongside Jews in Hitler’s Germany.

While her painstaking research yielded a novel that won many accolades, Giardina did take some controversial liberties with the historical record. Perhaps the most interesting of Giardina’s changes to straight historical accounts of Bonhoeffer’s life is a road trip to rural West Virginia in 1931. [...] to stay with classmate Fred Bishop in Charleston, West Virginia. Bishop’s character is based on Bonhoeffer’s real-life friend Albert F. (“Frank”) Fisher, whose home she moves from Atlanta, Georgia, to Birmingham, AL. Bonhoeffer friend and biographer Eberhard Bethge credits the real-life Frank Fisher with welcoming the young German theologian to New York’s African-American community and in particular with inviting him to Abyssinian Baptist Church, where Bonhoeffer became a Sunday school teacher and youth volunteer. Union Seminary classmate Paul Lehmann later observed in a BBC program on Bonhoeffer,

What was so impressive was the way in which [Bonhoeffer] pursued the understanding of [the American race problem] to its minutest detail through books and countless visits to Harlem, through participation in Negro youth work, but even more through a remarkable kind of identity with the Negro community, so that he was received there as though he had never been an outsider at all.¹⁴

On one occasion, when restaurant staff treated Fisher disrespectfully, Bonhoeffer made a point of walking out. His involvement with Fisher and other black Americans prompted the young German to pore over NAACP publications, study the work of James Weldon Johnson, and collect recordings of spirituals.

Giardina celebrates Bonhoeffer’s friendship with Fisher, re-named Bishop, in *Saints and Villains*. That Bonhoeffer would want to visit Bishop when he accepts a pastorate in Charleston,

¹⁴ Qtd. in Bethge 155. P. Lehman, in 13 March 1960 BBC program with E. Bethge, R. Niebuhr, F. Hildebrandt, H.L. Henriod, W.A. Vissert’t Hooft, et al (BBC archive reference: LP26507-8).

West Virginia, comes as no surprise to readers. Bonhoeffer himself is surprised, however, when he arrives in Charleston to find Bishop questioning his ministerial calling. Scoffing at himself for having told Bonhoeffer in New York that he'd received a call to minister, he continues, "Told that to the deacons at First Baptist too, when I came for my interview. Every time I say it now, I know it's a load of crap. A call can be what any poor fool thinks God or the Devil is telling him to do. Voices inside your head. How do you tell who's holy and who's possessed by demons and who's just plain crazy?" (55). Bonhoeffer sympathizes but has no answers for his friend, having undertaken ministerial training not out of a sense of calling but out of love for the rigors of theological study.

When the two of them decide to investigate rumors about "walking skeletons" at the Hawks Nest tunnel-drilling site in the mountains outside Charleston, however, Fred Bishop gets his calling—and he finds it as troubling as the lack of calling he'd had in his city church. Having confirmed that labor abuses are indeed killing tunnel-diggers, Bishop recognizes that the dying men are his congregation. In the chapter's most horrifying scene, Bishop and Bonhoeffer hide in a truck bed carrying five corpses away from the drilling site. When they finally slip away to head back to Charleston, Bishop muses, "When we arrived yesterday I [said] there wasn't any church [at Hawks Nest].... What if there is? What if it's my church?"

Dietrich felt his mouth go dry. "You have a church," he said.

"A church that has never felt right. Never felt the hand of the Lord on my shoulder when I walked in that church. I felt it back there. Heard the voice in my inner ear. That's what a call is, and it's a terrible thing. I don't want it, not at all."

The following year, back in Germany, Bonhoeffer begins to realize his own dangerous calling: to urge the Church to faithfulness, which includes speaking out on behalf of Jews. The night before he preaches his first sermon rebuking the German Church, he sleeps fitfully, remembering Fred Bishop saying, "I hope you never get a call[.] I wouldn't wish it on you"

(92). When he flees briefly to the United States in 1939, Bonhoeffer has a vision of Germany as the hellish mountain tunnel Bishop regarded as his church and thus recognizes his responsibility to return to Germany to call Christians there to account. “Go on in,” he hears his friend urging. “Go on in” (256). As he takes greater and greater risks that draw him toward martyrdom, Bonhoeffer repeatedly reflects on his friendship with Bishop and their West Virginia tunnel camp experience.

In discussing Fred Bishop, Giardina acknowledges her authorial debt to Frank Fisher but admits that “Fred is based a lot on me.” Giardina chafed under the demands of parish ministry, much as Bishop does in his Charleston church. “You’ve got to be a paragon,” she says, “and he can’t do the things he’d come to enjoy.... But he looks down that mountain tunnel and realizes the church is not just four walls and a roof, not just an organized congregation, but there are other ways to minister.” She confesses, “I think that’s sort of what I went through: for me it was the writing itself, the speaking..., and also the whole political platform. It’s not just hospital visits, and things like that, not that those things aren’t important.” Still, she observes, “Vocation is not an anvil that comes out of the sky and hits you. Your calling just compels you along. I believe more genuine calls make you say, ‘No way am I doing that!’ But it’s the thing that just bugs you and bugs you and bugs you.”¹⁵

Denise Giardina shifted from fiction-writing to politicking in 1999, surprising many in her native West Virginia, but the award-winning novelist’s move was true to form. As a third-party candidate in the 2000 gubernatorial race, Giardina championed clean air and water, community-based schools, and protection for local businesses while denouncing King Coal interests, a food tax, and legalized gambling. Although she lost the November vote, Giardina had secured the signatures of more than 18,000 West Virginians, twice as many needed to establish her “Mountain Party” as the state’s only independent political party. Eschewing traditional party

¹⁵ Giardina, personal interview.

labels, Giardina declared in a *Charleston Gazette* campaign article, “I am proud to stand against mountaintop removal, as a Christian and as a West Virginian. These are the only two labels that are important to me.”¹⁶

Giardina’s characters dramatize her own realization that “the church is not just four walls and a roof, not just an organized congregation, but there are other ways to minister.”¹⁷ Having trained for the Episcopal priesthood herself, Giardina acknowledges that her books are “more theological than political.” Still, she insists that she aims to pose questions rather than proselytize.¹⁸ In challenging readers to consider whether and how we might stand up for others, she has taken on a significant literary-political ministry of her own.

¹⁶ Denise Giardina, “Giardina’s Run Already a Victory,” *The Charleston Gazette* 26 Sept. 1999, 6 March 2004 <http://www.mtparty.org/denise_for_gov_archive/press/giardina092699.html>.

¹⁷Giardina, personal interview.

¹⁸ Norman Oder, “Denise Giardina: Mining History in West Virginia and WWII,” *Publishers Weekly* 9 Feb 1998: 69-71, Infotrac, Eastern Mennonite U Lib., 1 March 2004 <<http://web1.infotrac.galegroup.com>>.